

PopScriptum

Schriftenreihe herausgegeben vom
[Forschungszentrum Populäre Musik](#)
der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

aus: [PopScriptum 8 - Afroamerikanische Musik in Deutschland](#)

From Minstrelsy to Jazz

**Cross-cultural links between Germans and Afro-Americans.
Presentation at the International Association of Jazz Record
Collectors (IAJRC) 1999 Convention, Hamburg, Thursday, 29 July 1999**

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In 1997 I published a book entitled "Black People, Entertainers of African descent in Europe, and Germany": The book attempts to analyze the impact of African-American music in Europe around the turn of the century. We, the record collectors, are guilty of the neglect of areas of musical tradition which are under-represented or un-represented on record. And since most of the early authors of scholarly books and discographies on jazz were Europeans, whose only contact with the music was through recordings, the pre-history of jazz has tended to disappear from history.

This effect is particularly dramatic in consideration of the innumerable dancers, singers, instrumentalists, comedians, or actors of African decent active in Europe, who were often also disregarded and despised as a racial minority. While I did my research I also came across other aspects of the cross-cultural fertilization: German musicians playing for audiences - including black audiences - in the US in the last century, for instance, or natives from German colonies being exhibited in the zoo right here in Hamburg. Let me invite you to turn back the clock about a hundred years and examine some strange evidence - paper documents, recorded sounds and moving images.

GERMAN ITINERANT MUSICIANS IN THE US

Prior to the emergence of the Tin Pan Alley music business, musical life in the US was for some 200 years dominated by Europe. There was virtually nothing else but European - and for that matter much German - musical repertoire. The first American orchestra to tour Europe left the US as early as 1837. All the members of this brass band, led by one Frank Johnson, were Afro-Americans. And, of course, this black band played exclusively European repertoire.

American novelty dance tunes, many of which had some African-American background, did not appear in print until the last decade of the 19th century when they were made popular by the tune smiths of Tin Pan Alley. Thus, Frank Johnson and all the other American band leaders up to that time had no choice. But they had strong competition - competition from Germany.

It is a little known fact that German musicians played to entertain American audiences up to WWI. Vast parts of Germany were extremely poor. Poverty and overpopulation in the marginal agricultural hinterlands left people with three choices: to emigrate, to become either a home worker (or out worker), or else to survive in some itinerant activities. Many became itinerant musicians, earning their living in England and the US. Stretches of Germany became known as the musicians' belt ("Musikantenland"). Let us have a look at a typical village, Hohenöfle in the western Palatinate: In 1910 some 10% of the entire population, 65 men in all, were professional itinerant musicians.

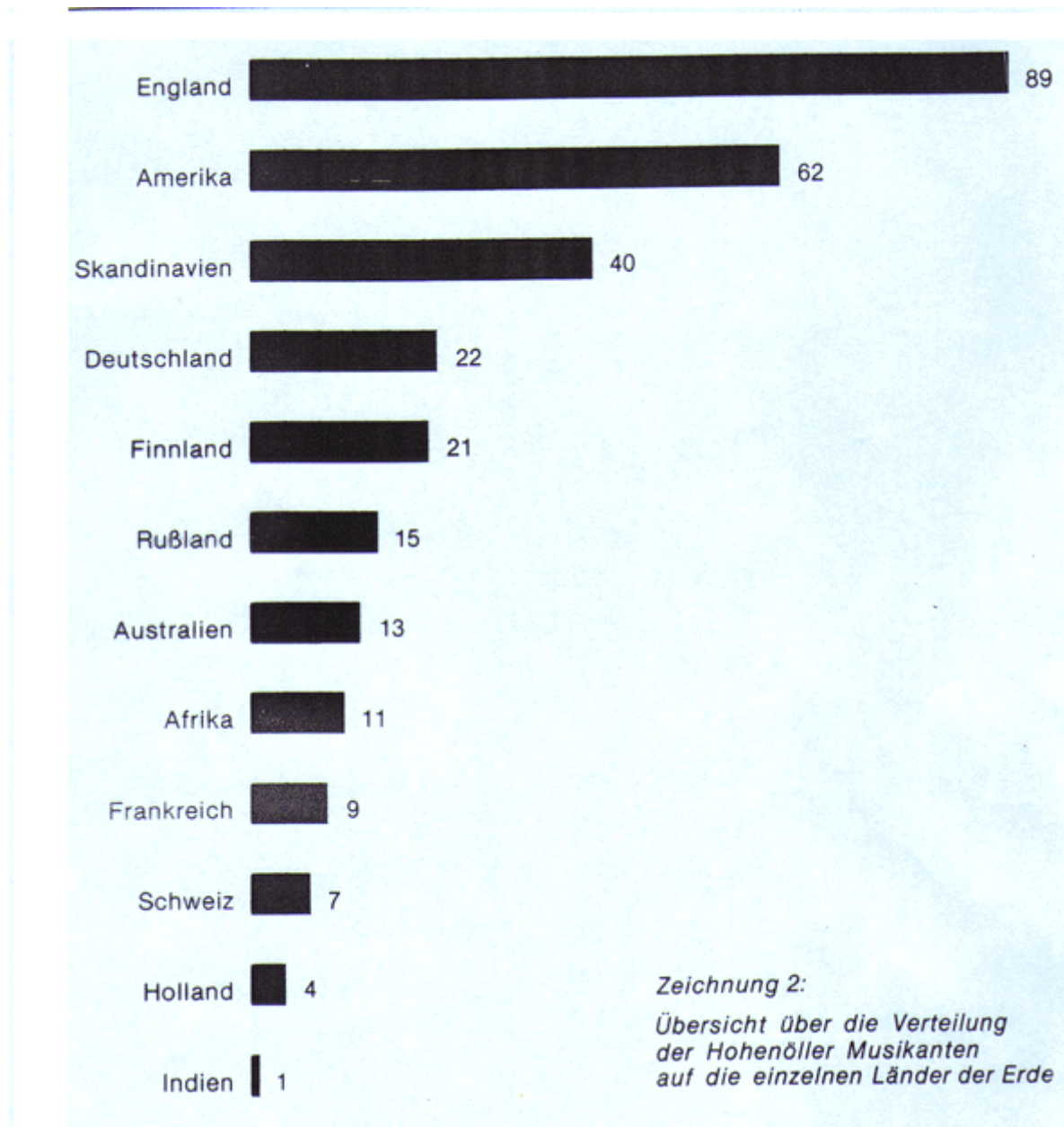


Illustration 1: Distribution of Hohenöfle Musicians, 1831-1921

A few even performed in Africa, the next illustration dates from about 1900 which proves that musicians from the very remote rural hinterland were exposed to Africans and thus, presumably, to African music.



Illustration 2: Kapelle Jung, from St. Julian, Palatinate, 1900

However, during their travels in the US they by no means catered exclusively for white audiences either. Our next illustration, also from 1900, shows members of the Kapelle Backes playing for prison inmates.



Illustration 3: Kapelle Backes from Jettenbach, Palatinate, playing for prison inmates in the US 1900

Those German musicians actually took up their trade once again after the war, right through the years of the Great Depression. The next transparency was taken in 1932. It shows band leader Heinrich Jacob from the Palatinate. The singer is none other than Frank Sinatra!



Illustration 4: Kapellmeister Heinrich Jacob with Frank Sinatra, 1932

There are no known sound documents recorded by any of those German migrant bands. How then do we know, what sort of repertoire they had? It is only logical to assume that they had to deliver what the public demanded. As professional musicians they had to be able to read music. As professional musicians they had to be able to play the entire repertoire by sight, and that repertoire had to include Ragtime, Cakewalks, Twosteps, and any other-fashionable American dance tune of Afro-American influence. And there is proof of this: Some of the local museums kept the original collections of notated music ("Stimmbücher").

Let us have a look at the next illustration.

Tabellarische Aufschlüsselung von 5929, in Stimmbüchern westpfälzischer Wandermusikanten zwischen 1870 und 1914 aufgeschriebenen „Piècen“		
<u>1. Europäische Gesellschaftstänze aus dem 19. Jahrhundert</u>		
<u>Bezeichnung</u>	<u>Anzahl Titel</u>	<u>Anteil in %</u>
Marsch	1.394	23,5
Walzer	1139	19,2
Polka	381	6,4
Rheinländer	196	3,3
Galopp	136	2,3
Schottisch	103	1,7
Ländler	44	0,7
Mazurka	79	1,3
Polonaise	22	0,4
Gavotte	13	0,2
		<u>59,1</u>
<u>2. Amerikanische Modetänze/Ragtime-Abkömmlinge</u>		
Two Step	162	2,7
Quick Step	33	0,6
Cake Walk	26	0,4
One Step	19	0,3
Barn Dance	16	0,3
		<u>4,3</u>
<u>3. Nationaltänze(Tango,Reel,Krakowiak,Csárdás,Hornpipe,etc.)</u>		
Insgesamt	31	0,5
		<u>0,5</u>
<u>4. Liedgut</u>		
Volkslied/Hymnen	1228	20,7
Potpourris	246	4,1
		<u>24,9</u>
<u>5. Aus Oper und Konzert</u>		
Potpourris	178	3,0
Charakterstücke	242	4,1
Ouvertüren	114	1,9
Lancers/Quadrillen	75	1,3
Fantasien	28	0,5
Oratorien	24	0,4
		<u>11,1</u>
INSGESAMT		100,0

Illustration 5: An evaluation of notated music collections in the western Palatinate, 1870-1914

This little statistic covers a time period of 45 years, and there are only 4,3% American popular dances listed. Only 4,3%? We have to keep in mind that American popular dances were widely available only from about 1895, not 1870. It is likely that during the last 10 years this repertoire accounted for the majority of tunes listed and played. And there is some secondary proof that those poor German mountain dwellers knew exactly what they were doing.

Those who did not leave their villages as itinerant musicians earned their living as home workers. In the black forest and other poor neighbourhoods they spent the winter manufacturing mechanical musical instruments for export. It is fascinating that those people, who had not even heard of St. Louis or Sedalia, produced authentic Cakewalks and Ragtime for piano rolls and metal disc Symphonions.



Illustration 6: Symphonion metal disc: Cakewalk

What did they sound like? Let me demonstrate this by playing "Whistling Rufus, Cakewalk" [!\[\]\(339a16584d5da0f0a3ca4e9ec17bf6a1_img.jpg\) \[Whistling Rufus Cakewalk\]](#). There is a wealth of such performances, which record collectors have simply overlooked for the past 100 years.

The textbooks tell us that the "march king" John Philip Sousa introduced the cakewalk in Europe. This is not supported by factual evidence. On the contrary, Sousa had an apparent aversion to African-American influences in music; he hardly had an idea what a cakewalk is, he did not compose any, and he did not normally perform them unless the audiences explicitly demanded it. What is more, he evaded ragtime, and later he confessed to hate jazz. The strange fact is that, long before Sousa performed his marches in Europe, German musicians performed original American dance tunes for the Americans, both live and as mechanical music. (But another strange fact remains, Germans - whether US immigrants or musicians at home - were unable to play jazz until the late 1930s. The legendary Bix Beiderbecke is the one exception that only proves the rule.)

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN GERMANY

Let us now turn our attention to Afro-American visitors in Germany. Let us briefly recall some historical facts:

- 1865: Abolition of slavery in the US, immediately followed by discrimination. The literacy rate among Blacks was only 5%.
- 1867: The Ku-Klux-Klan was established only two years after the end of slavery.
- 1890s: Discrimination reached such levels, that this period is remembered as the "Terrible Nineties". Lynchings were announced in papers, as if people were going to attend a picnic or some other form of entertainment.
- 1900: In spite of all discrimination the literacy rate improved from 5% to 50%. Educated blacks thus became a serious competition for poor whites.
 - The survival strategies for Afro-Americans were not much different from that of their poor counterparts in Germany:
 - Migration within the US to the states with comparatively less discrimination and better job opportunities
 - Occupation of employment niches which were not available to whites: black minstrelsy, and the entertainment genre known as "nigger song & dance"
 - Emigration overseas.

We thus note a strange parallel development: While poor German musicians migrated to the US, poor Afro-American song & dance artists migrated to Germany. The order of magnitude has not yet been established, but obviously, it must have been remarkable. For one year alone, 1896, I noted mention of more than 100 Afro-American individuals in the major magazine devoted to German travelling musicians and entertainers. And this could only have been the tip of the iceberg.



Illustration 7: William Foote's Black Opera, 1891

Some of the blacks arrived as members of large troupes, such as "William Foote's African Character Concert Company", which set foot on German soil at Hamburg in 1891. When the troupe broke up, many of the members stayed behind and can consequently be traced all over Europe, from Madrid to Nischny Nowgorod.

There certainly had been racial discrimination in Europe as well - but not anywhere as serious as in the United States. And many acts traveled as "Black & White", i.e. racially mixed.



Illustration 8: The New York Trio and Miss Violet


In actual fact: Many African-Americans married German girls and appeared on stage as racially mixed duets; this would have been virtually impossible in the US. It was a sensation when John Hammond organized his first Carnegie Hall concert in the mid 1930s(!), and presents black and white musicians on the same stage.



Illustration 9: Dixy Davis & Yambo

Dixy Davis and husband Richard Davis, like innumerable others, presented their performances 30 to 40 years before the Carnegie Hall event.

Unfortunately we know little about the musical and choreographical peculiarities of those "nigger song & dance" performances. However, there are a few moving films. Most of those early films had sound, provided by synchronized 78rpm records. I shall now show a very brief scene of a Cake Walk performed on stage in Europe in 1904. Both black and white performers are on stage at the same time.

Next I am going to present three different "takes" of a very brief and very rare film entitled "Belle Davis and her three Pickaninnies", made in Berlin in 1906. Belle Davis was light-skinned, she could and sometimes did "pass" for white. In fact, she was sometimes required to put on burnt cork when performing in a racial environment in the US. Although many of the early movies had sound, we do not know today which records were used for particular films. As "soundtrack" I have used a contemporary banjo solo, "Peaceful Henry"  ["Peaceful Henry", banjo solo, Burt Earle, 1906\]](#) and it matches very well.

In summing up: We can safely say that vast numbers of African-American entertainers, dancers, singers and instrumentalists toured Germany more than 100 years ago. But the question still remains: did they sing and play "white" repertoire or were there musical forms that could be considered predecessors of ragtime and jazz? Is it really true that, out of nowhere, blues and jazz suddenly appeared during the 1920s? Is it really true that, as some books tell us, the first recording by a black artist was by blues singer Mamie Smith in 1920?

More recent research has established that there were tub, jug and spasm bands in the US long before the turn of the century, and certainly not confined to New Orleans, Louisiana. The next illustration is a postcard postmarked 1893. It is obviously a "posed" situation and not a snapshot.



Illustration 10: Coon Creek Rehearsal in Florida

However, the mere fact that a card like this was on sale during the early 1890s is a strong indication, that this was a familiar, or typical sight. And recent research has also led to the discovery of early black sound recordings featuring music with typical African-American rhythmic elements. "Poor Mourner", recorded in 1897 on a single-sided Berliner disc, is thus of immense historical importance 🎵 ["Poor Mourner", banjo duet by Cousins & Moss, 1897](#).

Further research has proven that this sort of music was also performed by African-American visitors to Germany. Only very recently have we re-discovered some of the many recordings made by Pete Hampton and his wife, Laura Bowman. I estimate that some 90% of the wax cylinders and flat disc recordings made by Pete Hampton and many others in Europe have been lost forever.



Illustration 11: Hampton & Bowman, mouth organ and banjo

But the following and a few others have survived, forcing us to re-write the prehistory of jazz. The sound quality of the 1904 wax cylinder leaves much to be desired, but it features what must certainly be the earliest of very few examples of a black American playing the mouth organ with his nose... 🎵 ["Dat Mouth Organ Coon", Coon Song, Pete Hampton, 1904](#). This is one of the samples I put on the CD to accompany my book, "Black People", another being the very lively, syncopated coon song 🎵 ["I'm Going To Live Anyhow Until I Die", Coon Song, Pete Hampton, 1904](#)

Hampton and others performed not just in Germany, but all over Europe, northern Africa, the Balkans, and well into Siberia. The mobility was astounding. No passports were needed (except for Russia), but Afro-Americans could, and did, apply for passports for the purpose of protection and identification. They travelled the theatre circuits.

Our forefathers had no mass media at their disposal. There was no internet, no radio, no TV, no film, no record industry. Entertainment thus depended on very cleverly managed systems of:

- tent and circus shows (e.g. Barnum & Bailey, or Hagenbeck who invented the "Völkerschau" right here in Hamburg), who employed their own advance agents and travelled in their own railroad trains
- concert performances, arranged by impresarios (a good case in point were the Fisk Jubilee Singers)
- or theatre circuits for public places, theatres, music hall, variety houses, vaudeville.

Those theatre circuits provided for steady employment. Many Afro-Americans chose to stay here for ever, and some left entertainment to pursue their living in other professions.

Frenchs **Original-Neger-Ensemble**

*Gesang, Tanz, Bagno-
und Gitarre-Spiel
Duette, Quartette*

Spez.: Cake-Walke

Direktion: French

Monat Mai:


Zittau, Sonnensäle



Solo-Agentur: Konzerthdirektion Oscar Scherff, G. m. b. H., Leipzig, Hainstraße 191.

Illustration 12: Arthur French, 1910

One of the musicians on a photo of the Arthur French troupe is George Vaze who performed as a musician. His wide travels made him polyglot which in turn recommended him for employment as a receptionist at the US embassy in Germany. He remained there until the 1930s (during WWI he was transferred to Switzerland).

And one of the little pickaninnies on that 1906 Belle Davis film was Louis Douglas. Douglas was an exceptional dancer, certainly much more accomplished than Josephine Baker with whom he appeared in the fabulous "Revue Nègre". But Baker stole the show as she had obvious other qualities besides dancing. Douglas made Berlin his home, where he performed in two movie films, both of which had the distinction of being banned by the Nazis. I shall now show a brief excerpt of "Einbrecher" (Burglar).  ["Einbrecher", sound-track excerpt](#) - a dancing scene accompanied by a jazz band which features Sidney Bechet on soprano sax.

Douglas had his own traveling Black revue shows, he was a choreographer, musician, composer, and movie actor. In 1931, he participated in another German movie "Niemand's Land" (No Man's Land). In fact, he had the leading acting role in this pacifist movie. To the Nazis it was unacceptable that a man of African ancestry should be shown as the strong, dominant human being Douglas portrays. To the British censor of the time, it was unacceptable to show a German soldier in a sympathetic light. As a result British prints, entitled "War Is Hell", were equipped with an introduction delivered from his desk by a British senior officer reassuring the British audience that it is not unpatriotic to watch this plea for peace from the late enemy. I shall next present a brief introductory scene featuring Douglas in his civilian profession as a dancer.

NATIVES FROM THE COLONIES

Not all blacks in Germany arrived from America. Germany had colonies in East and South West Africa. Some natives came to Germany to be trained as missionaries, others pursued a profession, others came to complete their education while still others were exhibited as Circus Africans until this was formally forbidden. Thus, blacks in Germany were not an uncommon sight.



Illustration 13: Brandenburg Gate and a Negro passer-by

Africans were trained as musicians for the native Askari forces.

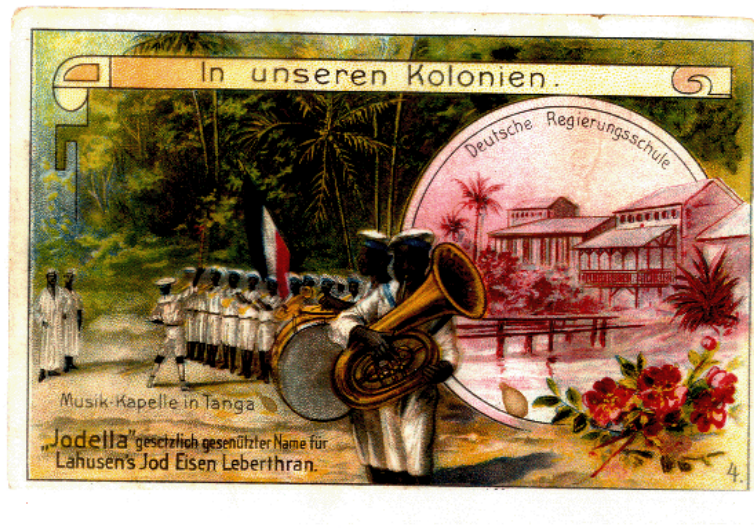


Illustration 14: Military band at Tanga, East Africa

Of course, the average German's perception of their colonies, and of the local peoples from the colonies, was guided by racist clichés.

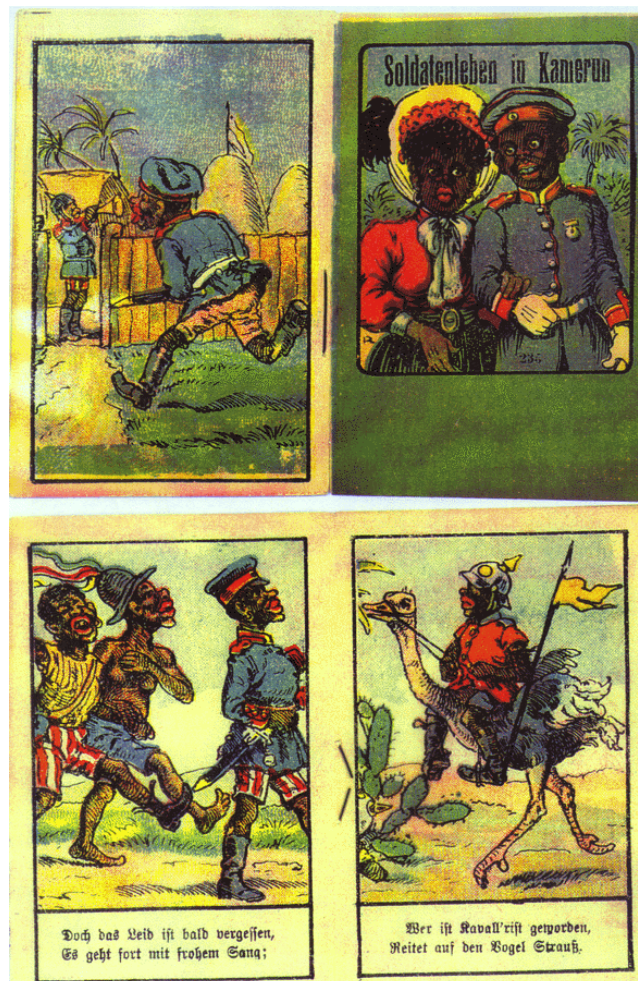


Illustration 15: Military life in Cameroon

Discrimination was effective enough to bar blacks from most professions, except, like their brothers in the US, in music and vaudeville. During the 1920s it became fashionable for dance music ensembles to have a black drummer. An interesting biography is that of Willi Panzer, better as Willi MacAllen, son of a Negro from British Somaliland and a German mother. He was employed in silent movies whenever a black juvenile was needed.

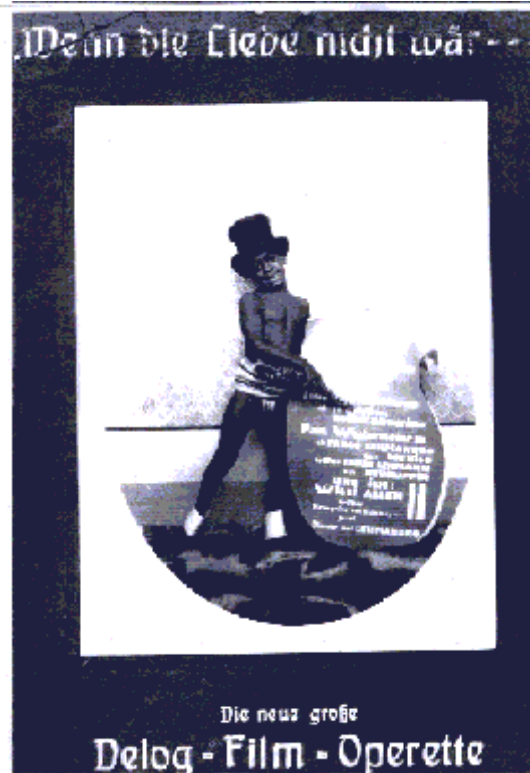


Illustration 16: Willie McAllen as Crown prince of Dahomey in silent movie "Wenn die Liebe nicht wäre"

He became the movie-goers darling and was sufficiently popular to serve as the model for one of Germany most widely known advertising images: The "Sarotti-Mohr"




Illustration 17: Sarotti-Mohr

Sure enough he eventually became a professional jazz drummer.



Illustration 18: Willie McAllen orchestras, 1930-1954

During WWII he lived in Turkey, but he returned to postwar Germany. He was compensated as a victim of the Nazi regime, but unfortunately he spent his money on liquor and he died as an alcoholic. Let me close my presentation with a final musical example: Willie McAllen on drums and a band around Frank "Big Boy" Goudie, and their recording of "You And I Baby", recorded in Berlin in 1952 by a racially mixed group  ["You And I Baby", foxtrot, Frank Big Boy Goudie, 1952](#).

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